



Emma Eccles Jones College of Education & Human Services  
**Center for the School of the Future**  
**UtahStateUniversity.**

# Improving Teacher Preparation Pathways: A Policy and Research Brief

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The purpose of the Center for the School of the Future is to promote empirically validated practices in public education systems and to encourage cooperative and research relationships between K-12 and higher education institutions.

## The Context

Learning how to teach well in K-12 classrooms is a life-long endeavor. At the forefront of this endeavor are universities, colleges, and alternative routes to teacher preparation programs designed to help teacher candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to teach effectively. All too often, though, teacher candidates have difficulty transferring the knowledge gleaned from education courses to the realities of schools and classrooms (Blomberg et al., 2013; Clift & Brady, 2005; Karsenti & Collin, 2011). This difficulty results in what many researchers call the “practice shock” or “theory-to-practice gap” (Stokking et al., 2003). When novice teachers begin teaching, they often struggle with the complexities of teaching in real classrooms as they juggle many responsibilities managing the classroom and teaching content. While they may have learned much from their coursework, including videos and simulations in virtual worlds, what teacher candidates learn in teacher preparation classrooms is still too far removed from what they need to know to succeed in K-12 school classrooms (Ashley, 2016).

The purpose of this research brief is to review research and offer support for teacher preparation programs to include a robust system of early clinical (or field) experiences in real classrooms starting at the *beginning* and *throughout* the teacher preparation program and not just at the end (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), 2018; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2010). These experiences can jumpstart novice teachers as they begin teaching and can lead to resilient teachers who remain in the profession.

## Research Findings

Darling-Hammond (2014) argued that clinical experiences are the “holy grail” of teacher preparation. University courses alone cannot fully prepare teacher candidates for the demanding work in schools and classrooms (Stokking et al., 2003). While educational leaders have long promoted clinical experiences in teacher preparation, not all experiences benefit those preparing to teach. The most effective clinical experiences are carefully and thoughtfully constructed based on what is being learned in teacher candidates’ coursework (Sailors et al., 2004).

Ng et al. (2018) contrasted two types of early field experiences in one of the consistently highest achieving educational systems, Singapore. Both types of experiences surprised teacher candidates with the “reality shock” of real teaching. However, those who participated in an extended early clinical experience that included higher levels of teaching responsibilities appeared to develop greater resilience than those of future teachers who participated in shorter clinical experiences with lower-level responsibilities such as observation and what Ng et al. referred to as “pastoral work” such as grading papers and making posters (also see Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Fortunately, research on early clinical experiences for teacher candidates is extensive and robust. Goodson’s et al. (2019) meta-analysis found that the most important teacher preparation experiences are those that teach teacher candidates *how to create a productive learning environment*. These early field experiences consist of Observation, Practice, and Feedback.





Powerful “clinically rich” field experiences follow a clear pattern of carefully scaffolding learning “through connections between course content and the activity structures encountered during early field experiences” (Sailors et al., 2004, p.347). For example, Sailors and her colleagues cited one Site of Excellence in Reading Teacher Education that consisted of class sessions on campus followed by guided practice as teacher candidates work with children in classrooms.

A robust coaching model should be developed and coordinated by university supervisors and K-12 educators and embedded within clinically rich field experiences. When K-12 educators are involved and invested in teacher preparation, early field experiences not only benefit teacher candidates but also provide academic support for K-12 students in the classroom and for the practicing K-12 teachers in the schools. In their review of Sites of Excellence in Reading Teacher Education, Sailors et al. (2004) identified *university collaboration with local schools* as a defining feature of excellent teacher preparation programs.

## A Utah Example

A few years ago, the Davis School District planned and constructed two new Teacher Academy Schools (TAS) with the participation of the Director of the *Center for the School of the Future*, housed at Utah State University, a legislatively funded entity charged with helping K-12 and higher education work more productively together. These two new TAS provide a pathway to teaching through early

and continuous field experiences for teacher candidates. At the same time, K-6 faculty who teach at each TAS are enriched as teacher mentors. TAS assist universities in bridging the gap from university coursework to classroom practice and provide more committed adults in classrooms and more child-to-adult interactions. Classes at three Utah universities—Utah State University, Weber State, and Western Governors University—are taught either on campus, online, or in TAS schools. Teacher candidates who enroll in TAS courses take those courses at TAS and are simultaneously placed in K-6 classrooms for planned field experiences at the schools several days a week.

Early clinical experiences at TAS differ extensively from clinical experiences typically associated with many teacher education programs. First, teacher candidates spend three semesters in the same classroom with the same “mentor teacher” accumulating 25 clinical and instructional hours in the first few weeks of each school year and another 20 hours during the fall semester. These hours are spent working directly with K-6 students while collaborating, planning, and implementing lessons with mentor teachers. Second, teacher candidates receive university credit taught by the District Mentor Coordinator at the schools. They learn from the Mentor Coordinator and then practice what they have learned in their assigned classrooms. Third, this apprenticeship model offers the three learning experiences demonstrated to be the most effective for early clinical experiences — *observation, practice, and feedback* from mentor teachers and the District Elementary Mentor Coordinator. By the time the three-semester course concludes, teacher candidates are ready to begin student



teaching having already spent more than 100 hours in classrooms with mentor teachers. Finally, TAS have designed professional space at the schools to give teacher candidates space to study, collaborate with other professionals, and interact with teacher education professors and other university students.

A unique feature of TAS is the coaching that mentor teachers receive. To become a mentor teacher at TAS, practicing teachers complete a three-hour training taught by the district Mentor Coordinator. Thereafter, the Mentor Coordinator provides ongoing coaching to the mentor teachers throughout the school year. This coaching prepares mentor teachers to explain procedures and routines, use success criteria to assess learning, improve teacher clarity, learn how to co-teach, and provide effective feedback to teacher candidates. Thus, teacher candidates are trained by veteran district and building leaders and experienced teachers.

TAS benefits the district by providing it with a pipeline of teacher candidates from which they can select new teachers. TAS can dramatically enhance districts' ability to not only "grow their own," but to recruit to specific needs and then have more control over how a teacher is trained. Through TAS, districts establish an in-house system for the district Mentor Coordinator to mentor and train teacher candidates. As well, TAS creates an opportunity to build a model school that can become a training facility for not only teacher candidates but also for beginning teachers and others who may come to the district with incomplete or underdeveloped skills.

TAS schools ensure a robust means of recruiting a diverse workforce and creates a system to recruit, train, and deliver a cadre of diverse professional educators. Finally, TAS provides opportunities for more individualized student instruction in K-6 classrooms.

To summarize, *the optimal combination for teacher preparation is coursework simultaneously combined with planned early and continuous field experiences to observe, practice, and receive feedback while teaching and learning in K-6 classrooms.* Unlike the "pastoral work" of traditional early clinical experiences, the embedded early clinical experiences at Davis School District's TAS energize schools and reduce the theory-to-practice gap experienced by too many novice teachers. These recommendations are consistent with the Next Education Workforce (Basile et al, 2023; Reutzel & Fawson, 2021) that emphasizes the need to immerse teacher candidates in school practice and employment from the very beginning of teacher preparation.





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**Janice A. Dole**  
Distinguished Research Fellow  
Center for the School of the Future



**D. Ray Reutzel**  
Distinguished Research Fellow  
Center for the School of the Future



**Reid Newey**  
Senior Fellow  
Center for the School of the Future



**Parker Fawson**  
Director  
Center for the School of the Future  
Emma Eccles Jones Endowed Chair in Early Education



**David E. Forbush**  
Associate Director  
Center for the School of the Future

The Center for the School of the Future | Utah State University  
2605 Old Main Hill, Logan, Utah 84322-2605 | [www.csf.usu.edu](http://www.csf.usu.edu) | (435) 797-0240  
Twitter: @USU\_CSF | Facebook: USU Center for the School of the Future



